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WORKING WITH THE DISADVANTAGED



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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE □ FEDERAL EXTENSION SERVICE □ PA-891

Both research and pilot project experiences are indicating that effort to help disadvantaged people improve their situations generally must concentrate on personal development. First it must increase their confidence in you and your purposes. Simply providing information about agency programs and other aids is not enough.

Most of all, those who would assist must understand and appreciate what life is like at the bottom of society. Generally there is a real communication gap between the providers of aid and the people with the problems. And usually this gap results from the great differences in life styles of disadvantaged families compared with the life styles of other people.

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WORKING WITH THE DISADVANTAGED

By E. J. NIEDERFRANK, *Rural Sociologist*



DEEP-SEATED HUMAN FACTORS INVOLVED

The lives of many families are conditioned by deprivation, especially in education and personal development experiences. Often "8 years of schooling" means that a person has had 2 or 3 months per year. This barely provides third-grade ability in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Children enter the first grade with little or no preparation. Many have never seen a nursery book.

Many families live in dilapidated houses, go without decent clothing, depend on folk health remedies, and have limited transportation to jobs and community services. Slang and speech defects may hinder communication.

Many tend to stay close to home. They are not well assimilated into the larger community and feel insecure outside their own environment. Tradition, habit, hopelessness, folk knowledge, and lack of initiative tend to control their thinking and actions.

Several recent studies indicate that while there were plenty of people in the areas surveyed who were willing to move, many of those who did move were woefully unprepared to adjust to town or city life, and about half came back home before a year was out.^{(1)*} Such simple matters as getting to work on time, accepting the noise of machinery, and showing up week after week are too much. Some have to learn about hygiene and how to handle a steady wage.

* Parenthetical numbers in text refer to reference numbers in Bibliography.

It is conditions like all these and more that must be faced in the early stages of programs to advance the economic and social development of the rural poor. Such factors limit a person's alternatives in trying to adjust to opportunities of the larger local society. And the limitation is even greater when the situation is conditioned by alienation and myths about the poor.

In many areas with a concentration of disadvantaged, a kind of poverty environment or culture tends to prevail. This is more than low income; it is a poverty of spirit as well. "The people think differently; they have a different sense of values than do people of other classes," says the study, *The People Left Behind*, by the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty.⁽²⁾

The study goes on to say that income is important for the necessities of life and to preserve self-esteem, but that poverty involves much more:

- It is lack of access to respected positions in society, and lack of power to do anything about it.
- It is insecurity and unstable homes.
- It is a wretched existence that tends to perpetuate itself from one generation to the next.

Oscar Lewis, who coined the "culture of poverty" concept, concludes that of all the traits and factors identified with poverty, the basic factor is *alienation*.⁽³⁾ This is a feeling of

not belonging—being unloved, unwanted, and lacking self-worth and esteem.*²

A recently published summary of research relating to low income families identifies four distinctive themes peculiar to the life style of disadvantaged people. All are apparently the result of deprived, alienated living. These are *fatalism* or a fierce feeling of helplessness; *orientation to the present* with a desire to preserve what little security is left by hesitating to take risks; *authoritarianism* or behavior governed by their own rules and regulations of outside; and *concreteness* or something that they can see and understand.³

Take education, for example. To the middle class it is the road to better things, but to many poverty-stricken families, it is an obstacle course to be surmounted. The truant officer represents a pressure from "the establishment" which their alienation and individualism tell them to resist. Thus, when children are absent from school, a parent can say, "The law states that he must be there 3 days a week, it don't say nothing about the other 2 days."⁴

Many of the disadvantaged tend to be pessimistic because they see no future for themselves. Much of their planning and doing has to be for today, which often at least partly accounts for seeming idleness. Thus, life for them has a certain meaninglessness, a powerlessness to effect movement. It is easy to understand, then, why many feel that success is a matter of luck and getting by. Many really do not grasp the structure of the world about them.⁵⁶

The roles of husband and wife are defined more by tradition than by reason. The man does not have the same concern for care of the house, the same ideas of what his wife should do and be like, as the modern middle class family man. Attitudes about the support and management of the children are different.

Behavior among the disadvantaged is not governed as much by the norms or standards

of formal organizations as is the behavior of middle class people, simply because such groups and customs are not found as often in rural poverty situations.⁷ In fact, rural poverty tends to breed a fierce individualism.⁸ People are free to pursue their individual interests as long as they do not trouble other people.

Informal patterns of communication and organization are generally strong in areas of concentrated disadvantaged living conditions, especially urban ghettos. But such patterns are generally less common and less intense among scattered rural disadvantaged families. Some informal communication and groupings will be found, and they can be developed.

Both psychology and pilot project experiences tell us that people disadvantaged by poverty and alienation will respond best to immediate, concrete interests or problems, such as fixing the roof, getting the food stamps, and treating an illness. They are not accustomed to abstract family goals or agency program concepts.

Many do not want to "be helped," especially by outsiders. Help means change, and most of these people fear change.⁹ They tend to feel insecure outside of their own environment, even though this environment might seem quite ordinary to the helping agency or staff member.

On the other hand, many disadvantaged people do have positive values, ideals, and goals. Deep down they truly want improvement and most of them have absorbed many of the preferences of most Americans.¹⁰ Frequently their behavior is not due so much to "their culture" as it is a response to the grinding elements of deprivation and stress placed upon them by the surrounding environment.¹¹ If you consider the aggressiveness needed in the work-a-day world of today, you will see why many people lack the courage to leave a world which, though marked by hunger and deprivation, still holds a measure of psychological security.

Many have a sense of pride. They disdain too much attention from outsiders—too much publicity. To them, their life makes some sense as it is. Each one wants to be treated with some degree of dignity as a person, not always blanketed in with some total group characterized as

** The concept "culture of poverty" is fully recognized by social scientists as sound and helpful, provided it is thought of in the context of the total style of living and not as merely a list of myths and cliches about poor people, such as "they do not care about future planning", "they do not accept middle class values", "they are of low intelligence", "they don't want to work".¹²

"they" or some other stereotype. A bit too much attention at the wrong time, no matter how well meant, can backfire, thus bewildering and discouraging agency staff members and community leaders. Especially objectionable in disadvantaged areas are statements and photographs which tend to show the people in a bad light.

Many are good-hearted people with a religious faith that is a main source of comfort. They may be deeply loyal, committed to their way of life, and not without happiness.

But at the same time, the disadvantaged know their own inadequacies, limited alternatives, and opportunities. Knowing that they are ill-equipped and unable to cope with the demands of modern technology and the complex community, they easily become resigned to defeat. Desire for improvement is necessarily motivated, not so much by drive for achievement, as by flight from deprivation and discomfort.⁽²⁾

When you remove most of the rational elements of life, what is left? Only the emotional elements.⁽³⁾ How would you feel trying to rear a family of 6 or 8 on \$70 a week? Could you escape despair, hopelessness, mental illness, instability, or alcoholism?

Or consider the logic of the following: "The lady says I ought not let the children stuff at the beginning of the week and starve at the end. But when they're starving and new groceries come in the house, there just ain't no stopping them."

Or take the woman who appears to have no interest in planning ahead: she may belong to a religious sect and is convinced that if she obeys the Ten Commandments and several others in this life, she will be rewarded in the next. Who is to say that she is not interested in the future? Her motivation is based on the strongest satisfaction she knows, the one thing her situation allows her to plan toward.

VARIATIONS AMONG THE DISADVANTAGED

A basic fact to keep in mind is that people in poverty are not a homogeneous group. They differ in aspirations and resources and require separate analysis and different approaches. Their past experiences vary widely and they live today in vastly different settings. For example, think of the differences between Appalachia, concentrated Negro settlements of the Deep South, city ghettos, Indian and Spanish-American settlements, the Northern Great Lakes region, isolated and declining small towns of the Midwest and Great Plains, and migratory labor camps.

Identifying poverty and disadvantaged situations is far more than classifying people by income. It is a matter of personal development and human resources, including attitudes, abilities, aspirations, health and life styles, which in many cases have been governed by years of deprivation and alienation. Thus, not all people with incomes under \$3,000 are in poverty and of poverty culture; not all over \$3,000 are out of poverty. There are gradients within each class.

Some families with incomes under \$3,000 have the characteristics and life styles of middle income families. They are where they are because of retirement, age, or some other factor. They may really not be suffering. Still others living in real poverty with incomes under \$3,000 try to follow middle class practices. On the other hand, \$5,000 or \$6,000 may still mean poverty for some families.

Many in poverty have high enough aspirations. But because they lack basic education and skills and have lived a generation or more in a culture of poverty and limited environment, they simply are not able to rise above their situation. The more able migrate to places where opportunities for advancement seem a bit more favorable.

Many poor people are youth and young families short on education and skills, operators of farms and businesses too small for success, or underpaid or underemployed workers. They may also be the handicapped, or others who have suffered some unfortunate circumstance.

Variations are also related to ethnic fac-

tors, which may cause more suffering in comparison to the middle and upper classes than that felt by others in poverty.

In some places, families of low income and disadvantage live scattered among the rest of society. In other cases, they may make up whole neighborhoods or larger areas.⁶ Communities are disadvantaged and depressed as well as families. Sometimes the cause is a lack of natural resources, the withdrawal of a major industry, or the underdevelopment of potential resources. Families may be poor because the whole community has suffered. The relationship of poverty areas to other parts of the community is important.

Overall, about 34 million people—18 percent

of the total population of the United States—are classified as poor, according to the recent study, *The People Left Behind*. But 14 million, or 40 percent of them, live in rural areas. They are 25 percent of the total rural population (about 3.5 million families). Three-fourths of these rural poor people live in towns and villages, only a fourth on farms. Eleven million of them are white. But the remaining 3 million nonwhite rural poor constitute 60 percent of the total nonwhite rural population in some sections of the country. In fact, 90 percent of the families classified as poor are clustered in only a fourth of the counties of the United States.

METHODS CRUCIAL

A little look at what living is like at the bottom of society, where people are disadvantaged in development and opportunity, as indicated in previous sections, emphasizes how absurd it is to expect them to be able to plan purposeful trips to town, seek out agency offices, and fill out forms for assistance or training. Neither will they readily go to physicians' offices or health centers for medical care, or to business places to ask about jobs. Thus, program goals and methods must necessarily be realistic.

A main reason for their hesitancy is that, from their disadvantaged point of view, they have developed a basic inferiority. They also know the barriers outside that have to be faced. Many expect little to start with, because of previous experiences.

Job-seeking, for example, takes persistence. It is hard for people in their situation to be persistent in hunting and making applications. "How do you do this? Who do I see? What words do I use? Do I have the dress and manner? I only have an old automobile without much gas."

Start with the individual and family

What counts with these people is your personal interest and concrete help on immediate

matters. This must be based on individual contact. Help on home and family matters is generally a logical starting point. For example:

- medical care
- basic education
- child care
- housing repairs
- storage space
- sewing for self and children
- nutrition, use of surplus foods
- consumer education
- sanitation
- manual training for men

The homemaker of a family in a dilapidated, unpainted dwelling surrounded by a dirt yard may first be interested in fixing something about the house or in adding a bit of prettiness. Or she may be most interested in learning to sew or read, or getting to a doctor.

The remark is heard in many such cases, "You were the first person to ever stop in to see us." . . . "You came not just to leave instructions, but to visit awhile and share some helpful ideas." . . . "You treated us as persons."

At first a few in every neighborhood must be "led by the hand," coached on what to say and do, and given much personal counsel and encouragement. You must establish rapport

and develop trust in terms of their immediate concrete situations, not in terms of an agency program. These people could not care less about programs as such. They do not comprehend them, especially if there are parts that simply do not apply to their situation.

But your acceptance and ideas with one or two families will spread to one or two more and on to others. A network of informal communication will begin to show up among the people. Be sure always to be on the alert to discern such behavior; this understanding will give you clues for later action and plans.

Keep a major focus on youth. Involve them. Listen to them. Develop ideas and projects with them that will give them something worthwhile to identify with and commit themselves to, individually or as groups. The young people want better jobs and a better life than their parents have had.

Learning experiences and physical accomplishment about home and community subjects like those above, not only lead to improved practices and conditions but even more important, they can lead to improved communication, more positive spirit, greater feeling of personal worth, and finally to leadership in helping other people. It also increases their confidence in outside helpers who, in turn, become more understanding of the people and their situations.

Aim toward community effort

Group work beyond the family is a must for significant, lasting results. After teaching home and family subjects to a few persons, work with groups on community improvement and how to work with action agencies.

Your personal attention plus individual instruction and encouragement will almost invariably produce greater interest, more self-confidence, and further work on other problems. Similar contacts with a few others in the area can lead to group learning activities on personal-home matters, then to working together on neighborhood improvements. Involve the men as the situation allows. They can help fix a roof or install a new floor in a house. You might set up a manual training class so several of them can make some equipment for the new nursery school or neighborhood playground.

Group influence in a society is one of the greatest motivating forces of all. Thus, encouraging its development is a desirable objective. It produces leadership and the cooperative effort essential to treat problems and complete projects that are beyond the scope of one family. It provides a way to relate to the larger community.

A "community improvement" club, committee, or association might well be an approach in areas of concentrated poverty. These have proved to be successful as a means of helping disadvantaged rural areas advance, among both whites and nonwhites. Always involve the local organizations and agencies, including churches. Clergymen can sometimes help identify cases and speed up rapport. But do this very carefully to suit the local situation.

Start community organization work with disadvantaged people on a very local basis. Don't force them to become a part of a larger community action system from the start. They are generally not used to functioning in groups. They especially are not used to analyzing a situation or solving problems. They hesitate to try until they have developed confidence in their outside helpers, and in their own ability to communicate among themselves.

Ordinary groups usually move ahead with decisions and actions much faster than the disadvantaged are ready to accept. An organization of disadvantaged has to search for and develop its own identity. This is not easy for people who have had little or no experience in sharing ideas and responsibilities and determining their own lives. Mutual trust has to be developed.

Build strategy and methods upon some theoretical frame of reference

Developing strategy and methods for working with disadvantaged rural people is a real challenge, which should be adequately considered by agency administrations as well as professional staff members. For methods are likely to be most successful when based upon sound principles and ideas supported by research.

A useful basic assumption to keep in mind is that the ultimate goal of the individual is happiness, and that the basic factor in this is the *individual's satisfactory adjustment to so-*

ciety.¹⁴ Most of the problems of disadvantaged people revolve around their difficulties in adjusting to the great and rapid socio-economic changes of the times.

This suggests the general strategy then, of focusing program activities toward helping people adjust to the new and changing conditions of the society around them. And in so doing one would want, most of all, to understand their situations and the relevant social systems of the larger community. To contribute to this was the main purpose of the previous sections.

Dr. Harold Laswell of Yale University considers the following social values most important in personal development:

1. Respect—treatment consistent with human dignity.
2. Power—participation in decisions that affect you.
3. Enlightenment—information necessary to make decisions.
4. Skill—development of abilities.
5. Well-being—good mental and physical health.
6. Economic security—enough income to meet needs without worry.
7. Rectitude—ethical standards, moral practices, religion.
8. Affection—loving, cooperative relationships with people.

Keep asking yourself how many of those you are working with possess or have access to these values. Which are most lacking? Start with their strong points. Keep the whole list in mind as you work on specific objectives.

Three basic deficiencies need to be corrected—the people must develop greater *desire to change*, show greater *courage to change* and have available more *resources necessary to change*. Agencies can help with the third only after beginnings are made in the first and second.

The culture of the larger community is always a part of the poverty situation within it. Its own institutional lag may be the main deterrent to economic and social development, not only of its disadvantaged segment, but also of the total community. Thus, work with the disadvantaged must involve the whole community.

Analyze the social organization—the various social systems—of the whole community, including the disadvantaged target audiences or “communities” within it. Who is in which system or group? Who are the influential leaders or decision-makers in each? Who are the doers? What are the controlling attitudes and sanctions or the proper things to believe and do, particularly with reference to the disadvantaged persons and neighborhoods? What are the channels of communication, both within a system or community and between it and others? What are the patterns of cooperation or linkage between systems, especially between the “established” community and the disadvantaged?

Try to understand as much of this as you can in the early stages of work with given audiences. Apply this understanding as you work with them. *Social systems* and the *social action process* become the core of your strategy. *Program development with the people* and *learning by doing* are other keystones.

Plans for human and economic development must be based on realistic situations and honest evaluation of results. In addition to things, you must necessarily be concerned with accomplishments in terms of:

- confidence increased
- attitudes changed
- communication improved
- group skills developed
- practices adopted
- relationships established

These are far more important than the numbers of people talked to, forms filled out, materials distributed, facilities built, or training classes formed.

In many cases, the social organization of disadvantaged areas is simple compared to middle class society. Therefore, new systems and channels of communication usually have to be developed as you go along. Work to reduce alienation and build up self-respect among people. This can often result indirectly. Community leaders and organizations can do much.

Don't think of underdeveloped families and communities as recipients, but rather as participants. Cooperation and self-determination are important. People can be helped only if they want to be. They cannot be pushed or manipulated into being helped.

Agency workers and community leaders may find it hard to understand and appreciate what *cooperation* and *self-determination* really mean and how to apply them. Your purpose is not to make disadvantaged people think and act by middle class standards. People usually resent a program imposed from topside. A sense of "our" program from their viewpoint has to be developed; "their" program from your viewpoint.

The greatest learning comes from "learning by doing" and by "sharing learning" with others like oneself. These time-proven tenets of Extension education apply especially to work with underdeveloped people.

You must continually help the people improve their group skills and program development processes as part of their work on community projects. By this time, you may also have helped them form some kind of community improvement association to contact outside agencies for help. The end result is further improvement of living conditions, health, education, job training, successful employment, new or better jobs, improved communication and personal relationships, and finally, greater assimilation into the larger community.

All this is social development, human development. It is just as important as economic development. It is not a matter of which comes first; you work on both together, not separately in a vacuum. Each is the means to the other as well as an end in itself. Reducing poverty is not easy. It requires know-how, courage, patience, and plain "care."

Generally, people in the upper levels of the disadvantaged can be helped more readily than those at lower levels. In many cases it may be good strategy to start with the upper levels. Later efforts can be directed toward less advanced families through the leadership of those you helped first.

Make sure your operating procedures are flexible enough to fit different local conditions, local people, and local staff members. The usual, current programs and approaches used with the responsive are generally not good enough by themselves. Generally the receiving mechanisms or local organization for induced programs with disadvantaged people should accommodate to the smallest governmental unit, the most local community organization.

Treat specialized development and anti-poverty programs as integral parts of your overall program, not as something added to the "regular" program. Some projects benefit the disadvantaged indirectly. Other projects benefit them immediately.

See that specialized programs get into and come up through the regular program planning and policymaking processes. This may retard immediate achievement, but your progress and accomplishment will be greater in the long run. Without the legitimization and support of the larger community and total agency, your staff will be in a constant state of confusion and anxiety. As a result, all programs will be less effective and some needed goals may even be abandoned.

Out of unified planning can come awareness of true conditions, identification of specific audiences and real problems, and a sense of participation—all leading to practical programs to fit local situations. At the same time you legitimize such work and involve the whole community in it.

If it is an "anti-poverty" program you are running, don't call it that with the people in poverty.

Sincere understanding and appreciation of their situation is the first essential to successful work with disadvantaged people—*empathy, not just sympathy*; a hand up, not a handout. When there are special factors such as nationality, race, or religion, it is all the more important to discern and understand the feelings and behavior of the people. Change must begin where the people are.

In many cases these attitudes and behavior are not caused by factors within their personality or culture as much as by deep-seated factors within the "outside" middle class culture. Thus, not infrequently, you and the larger community may be a part of the problem as well as part of the solution.

Professional workers and leaders of the larger community often find it hard to grasp, and may even deplore, the cultural characteristics of the disadvantaged people in their areas. Such characteristics may be opposite to their own accepted "American" virtues of work, initiative, achievement, and status in terms of material things. Some may actually suffer "cultural shock."* Actually the behav-

ior patterns of disadvantaged people are generally very logical and natural reactions of people living without hope, without much of a future.

Technological proficiency and community economic development are not enough by themselves. In some areas of the United States

where these are high, we also find poor schools and poor cultural environment. Education is a major factor affecting attitude and living conditions. It is the first essential in reducing poverty. But in many cases, improving education is first a matter of institutional and cultural change in the larger community.

SUMMARY

Differences within the disadvantaged segment of the population are as significant as the differences between it and other classes. In working with this group, we must first identify the subgroups in the county or community under consideration, decide which to concentrate on, and work accordingly.

We can induce change only if we understand the situation. Our concern must always be with solving problems and meeting the needs of people, not with selling pre-conceived solutions in terms of particular agency programs.

Utilize the science and technology of human behavior, development, and community organization to help people get out and stay out of poverty. Sound Extension education, teamed with programs providing finances and other tools, will produce the greatest gains.

Methodology is crucial. Tackle the concrete, immediate concerns of people and develop their confidence in you. This requires work with individuals. Later you can move toward multi-family and small group projects, then on to neighborhood and community projects.

A measure of personal development must take place before most poor people are ready for group action projects, "agency programs," and economic advancement. Institutional change within "the establishment" also usually has to be achieved. Understand the predominant attitudes and work on them.

Work from the standpoint of the people. Deep-seated feelings of helplessness, inferiority, and social isolation that affect attitudes, response, and other behavior are produced by deprivation in education, housing, health, communication, and transportation. These are not easily overcome.

Many disadvantaged people desire a better way of life and dignity. They may not need relief money or information about programs as much as they need communication, personal development, and a chance to be part of the larger community. Focus your efforts toward improving their adjustment to a changing society.

Relate work with the disadvantaged to your total work on economic, human, and community development. No work with specific audiences can be really effective for very long when developed apart from the "regular" program. The disadvantaged and other parts of the community are interdependent. A continuous program of resource development considers this.

Organize your program development councils to think, plan, and act with the whole county or area in mind. Involve all disciplines and agencies necessary to adequately analyze, plan, and act. Build bridges of communication to link social systems. All this is building "Communities of Tomorrow."

Long-range goals must emphasize the advancement of children and youth. Only here can the poverty cycle be broken in the long run.

Finally, program content, strategy, and methods are still not enough to produce effective results. Coupled with these must be a spirit of concern and care.

* In fact, a recently published research article indicates that "occupational group striving among professionals tends to significantly produce in them a negative orientation toward impoverished or lower class clients."⁽¹³⁾

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Three elements work together to achieve change for the disadvantaged -- their own life styles, the community, and the helper.

October 1968